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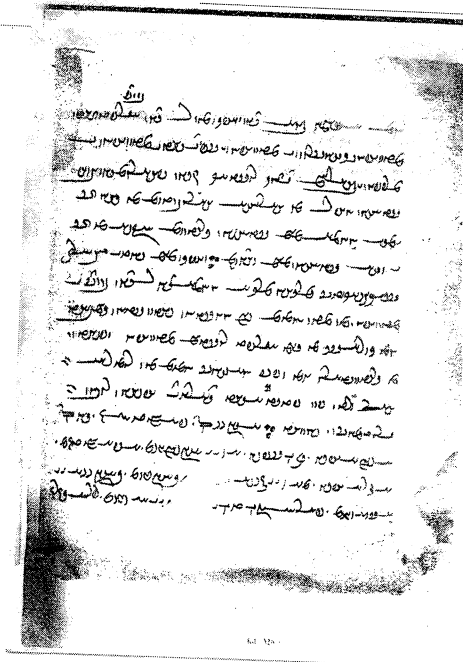
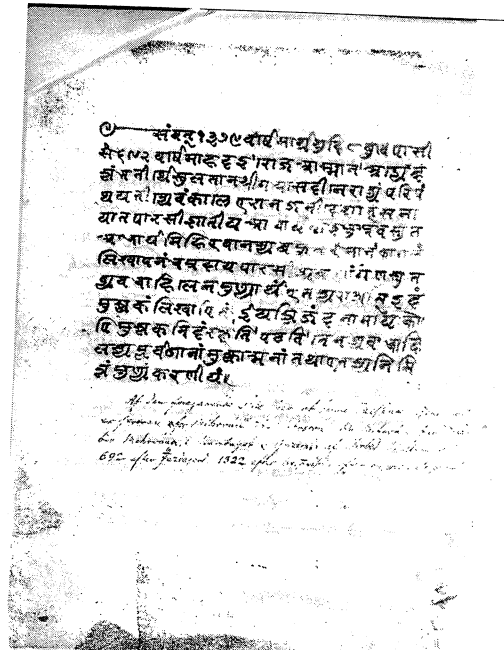
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## The lay Zoroastrian's perception of death and after death rituals

Prof. Dorothea Luddeckens

During the course of the last years I have become acquainted with the Parsis of Bombay and their culture, rich in traditions, rich in hospitality. Many members of the community told me about their lives and their experiences. Not only for my scientific and academic research have I learned a lot from them but for my own personal life as well. Contributing this article, I hope I am able to give something back of the gifts I have received.

Rituals of death can be found world wide and there is an immense variety of ways in which people deal with their deceased. They bury them in the earth, expose them to the rays of the sun, burn or mummify them. Regardless of how people deal with their departed it is not something they do in an everyday manner but with special rituals. Whereas some cultures prefer a quick burial with as little effort as possible, others observe detailed ceremonies which can last days, weeks or even years. Zoroastrianism is one of these traditions. To this day the Parsis of Bombay carry on with their highly complex Four Day Death Ceremonies. Additionally the Muktd ceremonies are being performed, in which the Fravashis of the dead are remembered for years.<sup>1</sup>

Continual discussions have gone on during the last years regarding Dokhmenashini, the special Zoroastrian form of air burial which is still practiced in India today. Neither these discussions, nor the theological interpretations nor the relationship between the rituals to religious texts (as the Gathas, the

Bundaheshin or Vendidad) are the subject of my article. What I will present is the way lay people, those who have no special degree in theology or the study of rituals, perceive the Four Day Death Ceremonies. It is no secret that not all Parsis have a positive connection to Dokhmenashini today. But still, most Parsis choose this kind of funeral for themselves, respectively for their relatives. Therefore I will deal with the strengths an average person sees in the Four Day Death Ceremonies, why the Parsis hold onto these traditions and where they find consolation within them in view of their loss.

Next to the very special ritual performances and prayers, the Four Day Death Ceremonies are distinguished by a special ritual space and ritual time. These are meaningful for the perception by lay people as I shall explain. It must be noted that only a limited portion of the richness within these ceremonies can be mentioned in this article and other important aspects, as for example ecology or the distinction between purity and impurity must remain unmentioned.

### **Place of ritual, Doongerwadi Grounds**

The designated place for Zoroastrian funeral rites, the Doongerwadi, is marked by the "Towers of Silence", the Dakhmas<sup>2</sup>. For most Parsis it is a place which is strongly associated with death, as one woman describes:

"Now this is a place where you know, that you wouldn't go unless there is a [...] death or something like that. So it constantly makes you feel depressed." (P16:72)

It is a place where you come to because of the departed ones, the opposite being true for an Agiary, which carries the representation of other rituals as well. It is one of the reasons

many Parsis prefer, after the funeral, to leave the compound and carry on with the remaining ceremonies in an Agiary and to sleep at home instead of staying on the grounds of Doongerwadi. On these grounds there is an overwhelming atmosphere of mourning which is difficult to withdraw from. Not only the personal loss is felt, one is reminded of earlier funerals and other mourning families are present carrying out their own rituals during these four days:

"you keep on seeing that, you keep on recollecting what you have gone through, you keep seeing people crying there. I mean it's a very natural sight and you can't avoid that since you are there for four days" (P16:62)  
 "you know that loss is always there" (P16:74)

It must be noted that during most conversations the association with death allows the association of life as well and does not represent an utterly negative attitude to the grounds of Doongerwadi. Far more, these grounds represent a place of beauty, peace and harmony as described by the following (two) contributions:

"when I'm at Doongerwadi I must say that the peace and the harmony you feel with nature is like no other, you know, it is an incredible feeling [...] with the birds and the trees and you truly feel that you are one with nature. And we all came [...] into this world, in a natural state, [...] without clothing and this is how you leave. And to me that makes a lot of sense. We are back, in that cycle. (P10.110-112)

"it is a lovely lovely place. [...] And the impression of my mother's funeral especially. She died in this month,

**Dasturji Dr. Hormazdyar Dastur**  
**Kayoji Mirza Birth Centenary**  
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## Foreword

Dasturji Dr. Hormazdyar K Mirza dedicated his lifetime to the study and teaching of Zoroastrian religion, Parsi history and Indo-Iranian languages. It is in the fitness of things that his son Peshotan along with colleagues, students, and well-wishers decided to give a fitting tribute to him on his birth centenary in 2007 by publishing a Memorial Volume in his memory.

No sooner was an invitation sent to scholars in India and abroad, positive responses were received and papers started pouring in from all quarters. This speaks volumes of the high esteem in which late Dasturji Mirza was held by the scholastic fraternity across the world.

The papers in this volume have been contributed by some of the most celebrated names in Indo-Iranian studies and hence this Volume truly becomes a treasure trove of information on account of its rich content collection. Also included is an unpublished paper by late Dasturji Hormazdyar himself, on the Significance of Zoroastrian Religious Ceremonies.

Incidentally, biographical sketches seem to be the preferred flavour. Dasturji Dr. F.M. Kotwal's paper is a sketch of Chahil Sanga, a devout Parsi philanthropist. The life of Rustom Maneck, with reference to the East India Company, is the contribution of Prof. Hinnells. Dr. Eric Phalippou's French paper deals with Anquetil du'Perron and Faribourz Nariman's semi-biographical paper is on the life of Dasturji Dr. Hormazdyar Mirza himself.

Dasturji Dr. Peshotan Mirza's paper is the exploration of a patronym – Dhawal, whereas my paper postulates the use of family names by priests to identify their diocese.

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in September, when everything is so green. So green and fresh. [...] There is a stone slab there on which the corpse is placed and then everybody says, the last rites, the last respects over there. And then the body goes in to this area that is fenced off. So beautiful. [...] The body went to the door. [...] and everything around green. [...] and then I see the body gently gently going through. And then I said, O, [...] Mummy is going to Doongerwadi. She is going to the flower gardens.” (P8.17-19)

The fact that within one interview both sides are perceived by the same person is certainly not a sign of inconsistency. The Doongerwadi compound, stands for the continuity of the community and life itself, because of its connection to the Zoroastrian and Parsi tradition<sup>3</sup> and the possibility to associate it with paradise. This holds true specifically for those people who had positive experiences with the Four Day Death Ceremonies on the grounds of Doongerwadi, experiences which gave them certainty that a peaceful and happy life after death is guaranteed for their loved ones.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Uncertainty of Death – versus – The Certainty of Rituals**

In addition to the close alliance between Community and Dokhmenashini there is a close connection between the individual experience of a case of death and the individual experience of the Four Day Death Ceremonies. Even if someone is deeply connected within a religious belief and a system of rituals, the death of a close person opens the door to a new situation of uncertainty. One of my interview partners commented more than once that you cannot know what happens after death arrives, where your loved one is,

in Heaven or in Hell. Death brings not only uncertainty but a helplessness as well:

“see when a person is living you can serve him, look after him, give him food, do various things, for the dead what can you do?” (P3.312)

This kind of helplessness can be approached with the prayers of the Four Day Death Ceremonies and thus the answer to the quoted question:

“there’s nothing but prayers, I feel. [...] we don’t really know what is happening in that world, we know on paper, in theory everything, but then the only thing which we can do for the dead is offer them prayers” (P3.L.312-314).

To what extent can the ritual satisfy the irritation set off by death? The Four Day Death Ceremonies do hold an answer and this on more than one level. The fact that Dokhmenashini and all the connected rituals, which are deeply imbedded in the tradition of the Parsis correlates to an “acceptable thing” and guarantees that you know what will follow: “you’ve seen this happen, now we know what’s going to come next” (P3.310). To perform these rituals means to carry out a duty and a responsibility, to the deceased as well as to the tradition itself. Fulfilling this duty gives the mourners the feeling of satisfaction. Participating in prayer enables them to do something concrete for the departed, to care for him or her, providing a feeling of comfort which was expressed in many interviews. The uncertainty concerning which consequences death brings for the deceased and the loss of actually being capable of doing something for the departed (in comparison to the possibilities while still alive)

can be compensated through the certainty of the rituals where the chain of proceedings is known. Additionally they offer the guarantee of assuming a responsibility, the certainty that you are dealing within the tradition and thus within the community and the possibility for the surviving members to continue to care for the deceased.

### **Community as an Emotional (Support) Group**

Through the systematic analysis of the interviews conducted with lay people about their personal experiences regarding death rituals, I learned about the importance of the community for the rituals on the one hand and the importance of the rituals for the community on the other. A Parsi explained to me the following in regards to the time between the Sachkar and Gehsarna ceremonies:

"In the mean time, we as relatives are supposed to start praying, [...] as much of prayers as possible. [...] we are keeping the Nasu to that area, we are keeping this area by praying holy and safe from the Angra Mainyu [...] it also gives us a solace, [...] prayers are a way of giving you solace, comfort, when we are happy we pray, when we are sad, we need prayers more, so when the person is dead [...] we pray to ask Ahura Mazda to help a soul to transit, to cushion that soul, to comfort that soul, because according to our theology, the soul, when it goes to the spiritual world, it's born again. Into the spiritual world, this is our theology. [...] So, just as a small child, when it is born, finds itself... lonely, defenceless, is scared to come into this world, [...] you know, it cries [...] and it needs the comfort of the mother, it needs the cushioning of the mother, the nurturing energy, [...] same with the prayers

nurture the soul [...] in the spiritual world, and the people all gathering and praying, comforts the soul to be born again. [...] This is the reason why we pray so much for the dead, you know. [...] This is the reason." (P6.142-162)

At a first glance my interview partner is not speaking about the community but rather about the emotional and psychological effect of the praying and the religious effect towards the soul of the deceased. Meanwhile, a clear relation to the community is made: "we as relatives are supposed to start praying". This statement is not referring to a specific situation or person but, as the expression "we as relatives" shows, to a role that each and every member of the Parsi community can partake of. The term "supposed" indicates that social expectations are of importance. "Our theology" further proves the relevance of the community for the understanding of death rituals. The verbs used to describe the effects of the rituals, "give solace", "nurture", "comfort" show the help attained by the rituals for the living who are mourning as well as the help for the soul of the departed, which like a new born, is lonely, defenceless and fearful. Both of these descriptions are used in reference to the community as well: "the people all gathering and praying" and "This is the reason why we pray ...".

The community as a social power in which emotions are communicated and shared is seen as an "emotional support group" and a "group who shares their emotions":

"it gives us a solace", "when we are sad, we need prayers more", "all the relatives are cushioning the family, so they don't feel bad staying at home and feeling miserable" (P6.264-266)

Within this emotional support group not only the living but the deceased as well are included, the souls of the departed are comforted and nurtured and the living share the emotions of the deceased. The living experience empathy with the departed as can be seen in the following excerpt of an interview with a married couple:

V: We may not see the spirits

M: But you feel it

D.L.: [...] so it's invisible, but "feelable".

M: Feelable, yes.

V: Yes, definite. [...] You definitely feel, [...],

M: Especially on the fourth day, you feel very easily relaxed.

V: The fourth day prayers, which are the day prayers which, denote that the soul is now on its onward journey, [...] and we note that the judgement is done, when the prayers are done, that the particular prayer is meant for the judgement, we are cushioning, we are cushioning [...] (P6.314.-324)

During a conversation with another couple this emotional support between the living and the dead becomes even clearer. The wife speaks of the quietness and peace which is transmitted through prayers and her husband comments that during the process the deceased appears to become more relaxed:

L: [...] and maybe the grieve is also sort of comparatively contained, [...], that calmness does come slowly over [...]

H: Sometimes people do observe after the prayer at the funeral prayer, that the face of the dead person is sort of calmer and [...] this is some kind of people's observations or imagination or [...] I wouldn't know, but this has been something, which we have also observed in some cases where the body, the face does give off that type of feeling that he is resting, [...] he is calmer, or he is calmer than what were the days that have passed..that type of a feeling. I would sometimes see on the face of the dead body (P3.280-281)

In the course of everyday life it is possible to feel close to the departed family member. Additionally prayers and rituals are capable of creating a community of spiritual space for the departed and the surviving members of the family. This is possible because rituals create a connection between the past and the present, between life and death, between the physical world and the spiritual world. With this in mind, the community becomes a concept which embraces the dead and the living, past and present generations. The community is established by the rituals, which are understood as a means of communication. In the event that the rituals be discontinued, all these connections would break apart completely:

I: [...] Muktaḍ's coming in, we remember our dead people, we even prepare the best of the meals for them, so that they can take the essence of the meal, [...] You put the flowers, you put the bell. It is to make the soul happy, because it's the only time, according to our religion, they have, time to come back to this physical world. [...] And so when they leave, [...], it's just like a guest say "Thank you, god bless you." So when they go back,



we get the blessings. So, we, as spiritual and physical world are interrelated in this respect, when we do this rituals. [...] And there's a continuity, [...] a link

M: Between past and present [...] past generation and present generation. [...] It's all the same thing. After us, our children will follow same rituals, same prayers,

I: So we have a continuity, we are not lost, then. See, if, supposing, this is our interpretation, [...] Supposing, after the four days, or ten days or one year, or whatever, we stop praying for them, we stop the rituals, the continuity is lost [...] gone and forgotten, maybe you will see the photograph and remember that person. But the spiritual connection that you may have, from the physical world to the spiritual world, where they bless you we sustain them, you know, that link gets broken. (P6.423-444)

To what extent these rituals are rooted in the greater context of the community and its tradition becomes clear through many interviews. This can be heard in several remarks, for example those who point to the fact that Dokhmenashini is a very old tradition whose origins are to be found in Iran.<sup>5</sup> The connection to the tradition is also expressed by references to the religious socialisation through my interview partners and their wish to impart the tradition to their own children and grandchildren. The community becomes the pivotal point of identification through which my partners understand themselves as a part of the tradition itself. Through this the single individual melds with something far greater than his own life experience: past, present and future. At the same time the individual is part of a community with common beliefs, rituals and emotions. Establishing all these

connections is the function of the rituals, the Four Day Death Ceremonies. As the rituals obtain their meaning within the community - the community as a community of past and present generations - and the communication between the living and the dead, the physical and the spiritual world has to be preserved by the rituals.

### Endnotes

- 1 Mary Boyce: A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism. Oxford 1977. Firoze M. Kotwal, Khojeste P. Mistree: Protecting the Physical World, in: Pheroza J. Godrej, Firoza Punthakey Mistree (Hg): A Zoroastrian Tapestry, 337-365, vgl. bes. 355-365.
- 2 Azmi Wadia: Evolution of the Towers of Silence and their Significance, in: Pheroza J. Godrej, Firoza Punthakey Mistree (Hg): A Zoroastrian Tapestry, 324-335. Firoze M. Kotwal: The Parsi Dakhma: Its History and Consecration. In: R. Gyselen (Hg): Au Carrefour des Religions Mélanges offerts À Philippe Gignoux, Bures-sur-Yvettes 1995 [Res orientales 7], 161-170.
- 3 It plays a major role, that the dakhmas are in history and presence a zoroastrian „speciality“. Additionally Dokhmenashini is connected with a lot of aspects of Zoroastrianism, such as conceptions of purity and impurity. See Jamsheed K. Choksy: Purity and pollution in Zoroastrianism. Triumph over Evil, Austin 1989.
- 4 At the time of the (second) Uthamna ceremony the soul of the deceased goes on its journey to the other world. See Videvdad 19,27-32; Hadost Nask 2,1-18.
- 5 See for example Dietrich Huff: Archaeological Evidence of Zoroastrian Funerary Practices, in: Michael Stausberg (Hg): Zoroastrian Rituals in Context, Leiden 2004, 593-630.